

AN: After the shocker of the previous story, I present to you what is a more reflective, emotional piece. I think some of my best description yet has come about as a result of this, actually, so that's a bonus. If you like seeing inside the characters' heads then this is the story for you.

Poison

Fix

TPYMK didn't know how long he sat there for. It was a long while; he knew that much. And yet time seemed to pass him by without any form of significance. What point was there in worrying whether it was two o'clock or a quarter to four when there were far more important matters at stake? Such information was juvenile now.

However, there did come a point when TPYMK was eventually woken from his long-term trance by the gentle prod of a wing. Immediately alert, his eyes snapped up to focus on the doctor, Tajiri, whom he had been speaking to earlier.

"Hey," she said in a soft tone. "You okay?"

"Uh... uh, yeah," TPYMK muttered, looking around. His surroundings hadn't changed at all in the past few hours; Sarafina was still lying in bed, her face decorated with a series of blotchy purple bruises, and he remained sat in the chair beside her. One quick glance at the faint sunlight flooding in from under the drawn curtains told him that it was late evening. "How... how is she?"

The former detective stared at Sarafina, saddened by the dreadful state she was in. He blamed himself for this. If he hadn't been so pushy with her, then this never would have happened. But there was nothing he could do about it now. The unthinkable had happened, and it just added to his guilt.

"Oh, she should be all right," Tajiri said, momentarily glancing at the lioness. The positive response was enough to lift TPYMK's spirits – if only slightly. "Those bruises are pretty nasty, but nothing's broken. The Sumu use is what concerns me more."

TPYMK tensed up. That was the worst part. The fact that Sarafina, during her "meeting" with the Family of Blood, had taken Sumu. He didn't suspect that she had done it willingly. Not one bit. She may still act like a hip-hop kid, but if there was one thing he was certain of, then it was that she hated her addict days with a passion. Evidently, she

had been *forced* to take it. What concerned him, however, is whether it would cause her to relapse, or damage her health significantly. Maybe both.

"W-why?" TPYMK stammered. He didn't often show signs of nervousness – but, given the circumstances, he couldn't be blamed. "Is it... harmful?"

"In my experience, first-time users of Sumu often develop a hunger for the drug," Tajiri said, resting one of her wings on the bed. "It's the most addictive substance I've ever come across. You won't believe how many overdose cases we get here."

TPYMK's eyes narrowed, his brain already working overtime on how Sarafina had come to arrive at the hospital in the first place. "But she's not a first-time user."

"Huh?" Tajiri seemed confused.

"Tell me," said TPYMK, folding his arms. "Who brought Sarafina here? What did she look like?"

"It was a cub," Tajiri explained. "She had really blue eyes. Not the cleanest animal I've ever encountered, either; I wouldn't put it past her to be a fellow user."

"She's not a first-time user," TPYMK said. "Sarafina is... well, she used to be an addict."

"But that cub—"

"She was lying," TPYMK interrupted. He had a hunch that whoever this cub was, she worked for the Family of Blood. "It's been a while since Sarafina's taken drugs. She's been clean for a long time now."

"Well, not anymore," Tajiri said. "If I were you, I would look into a rehabilitation program for her. It's the best you can do."

"Yeah," TPYMK lied, sounding as though he was far away. He didn't bother to tell Tajiri that he thought Sarafina had been forced to take Sumu; it wasn't something that concerned her. "I'll do that. How long do you think she'll be stuck here for?"

"Well..." Tajiri stared at Sarafina, who was still sleeping quietly. "I'd say another day or so. Wait for the bruises to heal up slightly, make sure her system is clean of the Sumu, and then she should be good to go."

"That's excellent news," said TPYMK, nodding. At least she wasn't going to be hospitalised for weeks and weeks. The worst thing that the Family of Blood could have done to her would be to break her bones – or worse, just murder her outright. If anything, the lioness had been very, very lucky. "Thank you."

"No problem," Tajiri said with a brief nod. "I'll just leave you alone, then."

The doctor turned around and headed out of the room, the double doors flapping silently shut behind her.

TPYMK glanced at the bruised lioness, a solemn look in his eyes.

Don't worry, he thought. Whoever they are, they'll get what's coming to them... eventually.

"Son of a—"

"Jesus Christ!" Askari cut in, looking both amused and somewhat horrified by the contents of the file Bora was reading at his desk. "The guy's got more spunk than I thought."

"Don't worry – he's wasted most of it on his whore," Bora quipped. "No wonder he chickened out when I turned up at his place."

"Looks like you were right about him," Askari said, glancing at his partner. "He did have something to hide after all."

"Yeah – and now I've got grounds to arrest his sorry butt," Bora said, getting up from his desk. "His rectum's gonna get resized significantly when I throw him in prison."

"He was reprimanded already by APD, though," Askari pointed out. "They demoted the guy. I'm not sure whether we can still—"

"Whatever," said Bora, rising from his desk. "I'm sure as hell gonna try. Now I know why he decided to torch that Sumu lab. Guilt. Plain and simple guilt. It's all the same with losers like him."

"Perhaps. Anyway, in other news, Sumu sale is at an all-time high now," Askari said. "They're saying their new product is topping Death by two per cent."

"*What?*" exclaimed Bora. "How the hell can you sell that much just by slinging all the leftovers?"

Askari shook his head. "Nah, man – they've got a new chemist in," he said. "It's obvious by now. And they've got, like, thirty or forty dealers operating all over the city. We managed to pick up a few of them, but they're not talking. Paid too well, probably."

"I'll see to it," Bora said. "I've gotta go get TPYMK first, though. And this time, he ain't getting away."

"Yo, yo, yo!" Moto looked pretty pleased with himself as he sauntered into the shack. The Family of Blood were sat at the table, as usual. "What up, homies?"

"Sold another batch?" asked Vitani, raising an eyebrow.

"Hells yes!" exclaimed Moto, grinning widely. "Think I've more than got the hang of it by now."

"Of course," said Zira with a pleased smile. "You're our top dealer, Moto." The lioness looked rather happy, which was a surprise when dealing with such a repulsive cub. But money was the most important thing in the world to someone like her, and if a little mound of rude slime was making sure she earned it, then that was perfectly okay.

"I know," said Moto. "I even took care of that rat problem for you."

"Surprising," remarked Vitani. "I didn't expect you possessed the intelligence to discover an undercover cop."

"It was obvious," Moto said. "I mean, Sarafina's hot and all – but when you're making fat stacks, there's plenty of pussy to go around. And no matter how tight she is, I ain't giving up this for anything! I need my fix, yo!"

"She won't be coming back," said Zira. "I think that little lioness learned her lesson during our little encounter."

"Oh, boy, yeah," said Moto, stumbling slightly. He was obviously under the influence of drugs in that moment, like most hours of the day. "You pounded her harder than I used to on a Saturday night. It was awesome!"

"Hopefully, HPD got the message," Zira said. "When they find her in the hospital, they'll know not to mess with us. They won't risk sending in another undercover cop again."

"Damn straight," said Moto. "And that means we get to keep churning

out the cheddar, right?"

Zira chuckled. "For once, Moto, you're talking my language."

TPYMK pressed his face up against the cool glass, staring out at the world below him. His gaze was primarily focused on the forest in the distance; the area where all of this tragedy had occurred. Things had gone so wrong in recent weeks; maybe it would have been better to leave Death's drug empire to fester. Who'd have thought you would be persecuted for doing the right thing?

It's all a mess, the former detective thought, feeling like he'd finally hit rock bottom. *You'd think I'd get a break by now*.

In reality, there had been more than a few breaks for the last human on earth. His spirit had been broken, his supply of ideas had been broken, and Sarafina's face had been broken.

The last one seemed more pressing than the others, for some reason.

Turning away from the window – slightly disgusted by the sight of the ugly world that he lived in – he turned his attention back to the most important animal in the room: Sarafina. She still lay there, unmoving. TPYMK briefly pondered on whether the Sumu had driven her into a coma or not; however, he remembered that the doctor never raised that concern with him, so he exorcised the thought from his mind.

Sinking into the bedside chair, he glanced sadly at the lioness, hoping with all his might that she would wake up. He felt lonely and without help whenever she wasn't around. In fact, he found it difficult to comprehend that there had been a time when he was doing all of this detective work by himself.

Then he remembered that there had been Haiba, and then Wazimu – if only for a brief time – around to give him a little guidance. But the former had been murdered and the latter turned out to be a greedy monster, so it seemed that disaster always seemed to befall everyone who he cared about.

And there was no one who he cared about more than that lioness asleep in bed.

"Come on, Sarafina," he pleaded, leaning hard against the armrest so that it made his arms ache. "Wake up... *please*..."

He had no idea why he was saying these things. It wasn't like she he

could hear him. She was lost in a deep sleep, as if some magical hypnotist had spellbound her into it. If the hypnotist were a psychotic drug lord and the spell was a hit of Sumu, that is.

The truth slowly sank in for TPYMK. Sarafina wasn't going to wake up for quite some time, and when she did, she might never be the same again.

However, just as the bleak thought burrowed its way into the human's mind, it seemed that a break had decided to present itself before him after all.

Sarafina had woken up.

It took a moment for TPYMK to register this. A fleeting thought crossed his mind: *Am I hallucinating?* Maybe some of the Sumu residue from Sarafina's nose had floated across the room and ended up—

No. That was just silly. For once, the former detective learned to accept life's little miracles, and embraced the fact that Sarafina had arisen from her drug-induced slumber.

It was a soul-pleasing occurrence, to say the least.

The lioness slowly turned her head to the right, her gaze instantly meeting with TPYMK's. Everything else ceased to possess any significance, since it was quite clearly that both of them got what they wanted in that exact moment.

"Sarafina..." TPYMK began, his voice catching in his throat. He found himself speechless, for once. Usually, he was pretty good with words. Maybe if he'd decided on a less labouring career then he wouldn't have had a bad shot at becoming a writer. "I... I don't know where to begin..."

And, promptly, tears began to drizzle down Sarafina's cheeks.

The lioness broke down in sobs, sadness consuming her body as she adjusted to her surroundings and the horrible memories came flooding back like a disastrous downpour. Despite the fact that Sumu was known for causing memory loss, that didn't appear to be the case here.

For once, that seemed unfortunate.

"I'm sorry..." Sarafina sobbed, her eyes bloodshot from the aftereffects of Sumu use. "I'm so sorry..."

Her face fell, sniffling, into the pillow, depressed and agonised by the harrowing events that she thought herself to be responsible for.

"It's okay, Sarafina," TPYMK soothed, rubbing the lioness's shoulder in a gentle manner, trying his best to console her. It didn't seem to be taking any kind of useful effect, however. Still, he pressed on. "It's okay..."

But the sobs got louder and the tears leaked faster, leaving TPYMK wondering if there was any lower recess for the two to sink.

After quite a notable period of time – TPYMK guessed that it was around the forty-minute mark – Sarafina finally seemed to have drained all the excess water from her body and lay there silently in bed, staring blankly at the wall. Tear stains didn't really help with her appearance; in fact, the purple bruises seemed now like some vile parasitic entity clinging to her face. Pleasant looks were lost on her, it seemed.

It took TPYMK a while to realise that he hadn't let go of Sarafina's shoulder; as an instinctive action, he did just the opposite, releasing his soft grip and allowing his arm to fall from the bed. He'd stopped speaking; he figured that the lioness just needed to let it all out before eventually trying to strike up a conversation with him.

And "eventually" happened to be a very long time.

"Sarafina..." TPYMK began quietly, deciding to try and communicate with the lioness in a polite and friendly manner. "I know how you're feeling right now—"

"I deserve to die."

The interruption caught TPYMK off-guard. "What?"

"I deserve to die," Sarafina repeated. There was no happiness or sadness in her tone. The lioness had adjusted her position, too, so now she was staring up at the ceiling, a reflective expression in her gaze.

TPYMK shook his head. "Now, listen, Sarafina, this is just—"

"I took that Sumu," she said, giving no clear indication as to whether she was utterly disgusted with herself or merely passing judgement in a logical manner. "I told myself I would never do it again. I should have let them kill me. Instead... I acted like a pussy. I took the easy way

out."

"You did the right thing," TPYMK assured her. "Granted, it wasn't the most... glorifying of choices, but you did what you could under the circumstances."

"Enough rationalising," Sarafina snapped, using a word that TPYMK hadn't expected her to utter. She stared him in the eyes, looking like a perfect example of someone who had lost their way in life. The former detective couldn't recall her looking so soulless since losing her baby – and considering how *that* had almost ended, he feared what the repercussions of this recent fiasco would be. "I screwed up, and now I'm paying the price for it. I get what I deserve."

"This isn't your fault," TPYMK told her. "It's that... that psychopathic Family. They did this to you."

"It's only a matter of time," Sarafina replied. "Before the cravings start up, and I go using again. Maybe even dealing. Who the hell knows? I'm just a 'junkie loser', remember?" TPYMK had used such a hurtful insult on her once upon a time; he felt guilty for doing so, but it was now a case of too little, too late.

"That isn't true," TPYMK said, feeling quite helpless at the moment. "You're... you're more than that."

"We'll see," Sarafina said, as if she knew what the future held for her. The lioness closed her eyes, drifting off into sleep again. "We'll see..."

Both TPYMK and Sarafina slept through the whole night – both of them deserving some well-earned rest, given the circumstances – and by morning, things had changed for the two slightly. Mostly in Sarafina's case. After an hour or so of questioning by the doctor – for which the lioness had provided vague answers such as, "I'm chilled, yo!" – she decided that Sarafina was fit to be discharged.

Hence why TPYMK was now wheeling the lioness out of the hospital in a wheelchair.

"I can walk, jerkoff," Sarafina muttered, having regained some of her usual personality back. She didn't look too happy about her situation – it was only a few bruises, after all – and she was being as stropky about it as possible. "You don't have to wheel me out of here like... Professor X or something."

"It's procedure," TPYMK replied, the automatic doors of the hospital

lobby obediently sliding open before them. "I'll ditch the wheelchair once we're back to the Junk-Mobile."

"You're calling it that, too?" Sarafina scowled.

"Well, you seem to have christened it with that name, so I might as well get used to it," the former detective retorted, wheeling Sarafina across the parking lot. The Junk-Mobile wasn't parked too far away; the skid marks were still visible on the ground from how fast he'd screeched into the place. When it came to Sarafina, his mind-set was usually "find her at all costs". The lioness could see that motto etched out on the tarmac.

"Right, then," said TPYMK, holding open the passenger door so Sarafina could climb into the car. She didn't see why; it was her face that was a pitiful sight, not her legs. The last human on earth realised his error when he saw the sullen expression on her face. "Sorry."

"Whatever," she mumbled, sinking into her seat.

TPYMK sighed deeply, wishing that Sarafina wouldn't be so difficult with her. He was trying to help the lioness out, for God's sake. The least she could do was be a little more cooperative.

Since he knew that wasn't going to be the case, TPYMK climbed into the car after her and started the engine.

They drove back home in silence.

TPYMK settled into his bed, eyes locked onto the ceiling as he considered the result of the previous few days.

His life was falling apart.

Despite the fact that Sarafina had returned home, she seldom said a word to him for the rest of the evening. She simply sat in front of the TV, eating junk food and watching cartoons all day. It seemed like she was trying to escape the outside world. TV was a welcome distraction for her. The former detective supposed that she couldn't be blamed; it wasn't every day that you were forced to take drugs and got pummelled for the courtesy.

With that miserable conclusion swimming around in his brain, TPYMK closed his eyes, and tried to get some sleep.

He only had to wait two minutes before there was a disturbance

underneath the sheets. He considered reaching for his gun, but then decided that he didn't care, remaining in his current position.

Sarafina was lying beside him, also staring up at the ceiling. There was a long moment of silence between the two.

But then, she spoke.

"You know I love you, right?"

TPYMK didn't answer for what seemed like months.

"Yeah. I know."

And nothing more was said.

AN: Still pretty bleak, isn't it? Sarafina has been discharged from hospital, but she's becoming increasingly colder towards TPYMK – or is she? I suppose those final few moments imply something different about her feelings... I'll leave you to speculate on this. I like evoking a bit of discussion, after all.